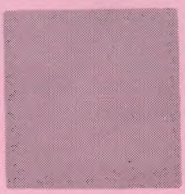
NOW WHAT



Debate is today taking place on many educational issues but one controversy has concerned parents and teachers (and pupils) for longer than any other. It is the position of religious belief and observance in our schools.

Concern over this issue comes from different sources. One is the fact that we are at variance with other democracies (such as France and the USA) in making religion compulsory in schools. Another is an increasing awareness that our own society in the United Kingdom now embraces a wide range of beliefs, and includes a large number of people who hold a non-religious view of life. A third powerful factor is the recognition that compulsory religion in the schools for the past thirty years has not resulted in improved social and moral behaviour, and a fourth, the growing appreciation that morality and religion are different in essence though, for the religious, sometimes related.

The last few years have seen the growth of a widespread disapproval of the clauses of the 1944 Education Act that lay down compulsory religious instruction and acts of worship, and a growing consensus of educational opinion as to the way forward. This leaflet sets out to show the main points in this consensus as they relate to the situation in County (state) schools. It quotes from the following publications by religious and educational organisations:

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, PRESENT AND FUTURE – Reports on Education No. 58 issued by Department of Education & Science HMSO September 1969. *DES*

MORAL & RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN COUNTY SCHOOLS – A report by a Working Party of the Social Morality Council 1970.* *SMC*

THE FOURTH R: The report of the Commission on religious education in schools. Chaired by the Bishop of Durham. SPCK 1970. *DURHAM*

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS – Schools Council Working Paper 36, 1971.* *SC 36*

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS – Schools Council Working Paper 44, 1972.* *SC 44*

THE WHOLE CURRICULUM 13-16 – Schools Council Working Paper 53, 1975.* *SC 53*

STATEMENT OF THE STANDING CONFERENCE ON INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE IN EDUCATION – Adopted at Conference July 1974. *I-F*

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: A CONSIDERED VIEW – Recommendations of the Association of Christian Teachers 1976. *ACT*

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN COUNTY SCHOOLS – A discussion document by the Free Church Federal Council Education Committee 1976. *FCFC*

WHAT FUTURE FOR THE AGREED SYLLABUS? Report of a Working Party of the Religious Education Council of England & Wales 1976. *REC*

(The source of each quotation may be identified by reference to the abbreviation shown in the right hand column.)

*See notes on the organisations at the end of this leaflet.

THE COMPOSITION OF OUR SOCIETY

"Our society today is truly plural, in the sense not only that numerous religious communities co-exist in it but also that a large section of it is non-believing." *SMC p.6.*

". . . the pluralist society, so called, becomes not only multi-racial, and multi-cultural, but also multi-religious."

"Yet another factor in our changed society is that whilst there has always been a minority of citizens who would accept no religious belief, the numbers have increased of those who would not be ashamed or defensive about being known as Humanists, or Secularists, Agnostics or Atheists, Communists or Marxists. Pluralism cannot be limited to a variety of religious beliefs: it must also include today a variety of ideological concepts outside any definition of religious allegiance." *FCFC p.9.*

The Teaching of Religion

in County Schools is governed by Agreed Syllabuses. Those produced after the 1944 Act were clearly based on nurture in the Christian faith. After the mid 1960's, some were re-written: but still –

"They are all Christian documents which assume that the fundamental objective of religious education is to inculcate Christianity." *SC 36 p.33.*

"In thinking about the present extent of the subject it is useful to look at the term 'religious education' itself. It is now, though unofficially, called 'religious education', whereas formerly it was 'religious instruction', presumably because it was then regarded as instructing pupils in a particular religion (generally, in this country, the Christian one). Those who approved of this called it induction into the community's faith; those who disapproved called it indoctrination." *REC p.9.*

"To press for acceptance of a particular faith or belief system is the duty and privilege of the Churches and other similar religious bodies. It is certainly not the task of a teacher in a county school." *DURHAM p.103. Section 217.*

"To sum up, many writers on religious education, and many committees drafting agreed syllabuses, still assume a 'confessional' or dogmatic approach . . . Such an approach is not only inappropriate in a multi-belief community; it is also contrary to the very spirit of education as it is understood and practised today." *SC 36 p.27.*

"THE VERY SPIRIT OF EDUCATION" — What is that Spirit?

"Religious Education should be defined as a developmental process by which every child, wherever he lives, will have the opportunity of learning about the ideals and insights which inspire mankind as enshrined in the major world religions and other stances for living." *I-F Para. 2.*

"Pupils should have opportunities to gain knowledge of and to evaluate the claims of religion but the school should not advance, on its authority, the doctrines of any sect or creed." *SC 53 p.25.*

"It is desirable that the curriculum should be properly representative of the many views extant, that the material should be presented in an educational manner, and that pupils should not be pressured to accept or reject any particular position, but encouraged to consider the adequacy of its claims." *REC p.8.*

"One of the results of RE should be to create in boys and girls a more sensitive understanding of their own beliefs and of the different beliefs by which others govern their lives: such a sensitive understanding is not the prerogative of Christians."
SMC p.13.

"Religious Education aims to foster a certain kind of understanding which will enable children to make intelligent and personal commitments. It does not try to produce in children a commitment to prescribed beliefs. This distinction means that the pupil's right to accept or reject religious beliefs is sacrosanct, and no attempt should be made to manipulate young minds into conformity with any creed or ideology." *ACT Column 2.*

ASSEMBLY AND WORSHIP

The 1944 Act states (section 25) that "the school day . . . shall begin with collective worship on the part of all pupils in attendance at the school. . ."

"Corporate worship is strictly the act of a believing community devoted to the object of worship."
SMC p.9.

"The vast majority of school assemblies cannot now be regarded as assemblies of worship."
FCFC p.11.

"It is reasonable to ask if young children are really capable of engaging in worship of this kind. The many definitions of worship (for example, 'Offering him who is worthy the honour that is due to him', 'Response to God who has first drawn near to us,' etc.), the theological presuppositions of worship (that God exists, that he is transcendent, immanent and omnipresent), and the practical implications of worship are extremely daunting even for an adult. It surely goes without saying that any activity involving abstract ideas of this kind must be regarded as intellectually unsuitable for children in the primary-school range."
SC 44 p.66.

". . . the time has come to resolve this ambivalence by giving up the notion that a county primary school assembly ought to be an act of Christian worship in the commonly accepted sense."
SC 44 p.65.

"Many of the objections to the very idea of having the secular school involved in an act of worship are voiced by informed educationists who have strong religious convictions of their own, as well as by secularists within the profession of teaching at school, college, and university level. There seems also to be a growing surge of dissent among some older pupils." *SC 36 p.97.*

"Those who wish to see the religious element omitted point to the absurdity and dishonesty of expecting pupils from a wide variety of backgrounds to participate in something that the majority of their parents have little time for, and which they cannot yet evaluate objectively, however they react now. There are also fears that non-conforming staff may miss promotion."*SC 36 p.97.*

"The compulsory act of worship raises special problems because it assumes that every school is a Christian community." *ACT Column 4.*

"It is extremely difficult to provide a significant personal, or even communal, experience for an entire school, and not only members of staff but many pupils today are either indifferent or hostile to it." *DES*

"School worship in secondary schools is often formalized, arid and removed from every other aspect of life." *SC 36 p.100.*

". . . the increasingly hostile reaction of those staff and pupils who feel that the present arrangements are an impertinent waste of their time and the educational resources of the nation." *SC 36 p.98.*

THE NEED FOR REFORM OF THE RELIGIOUS CLAUSES OF THE 1944 ACT

"We saw this . . . (a daily act of worship and at least one period of religious instruction) . . . as part of a large bargain . . . that the package deal was good politics . . ."

"My Lords . . . it is not right to retain religion as a compulsory subject . . . the 1944 Act is now badly in need of revision . . ." Viscount Eccles, former Minister of Education, speaking in the House of Lords Debate on Religious Education.

(Hansard, 15.11.1967 Columns 740/741).

"Christian worship as a daily act imposed on the whole school is no longer justifiable." *SMC p.10.*

"Worship . . . should not be required by law . . ." *I-F Para 3.*

" . . . we would favour giving schools discretion in the matter of collective worship. This would entail removing the present legislative requirement and would place upon the schools a further responsibiliy for judgment and decision." *SC 53 p.25.*

"The religious clauses themselves were introduced in 1944 as an attempt to reconcile the sectarian interests of Christian denominations. We are of the opinion that a revision of these clauses and the widening of the material of Agreed Syllabuses to include both religious and secular views of life may well do in 1984 what was needed in 1944; that is, a positive attempt to reconcile and bring to mutual respect those who share one communal life but whose responses to life follow different paths. If boys and girls can grow up with an understanding and respect for one another even if their personal beliefs are very different from one another, then such a revision will prove to be more than worth while." *FCFC p.14.*

WHAT "RELIGIOUS EDUCATION" SHOULD BECOME

"That the subject should be regarded as helping pupils to become educated about religions and other life-stances and to be both appreciative and critical of them." *REC p.3.*

"One of the chief problems facing religious education at the moment is whether or not these non-supernatural life-stances are included in its terms of reference. If they are, the term 'religious education' is inappropriate, offensive to some, and probably needs to be changed . . .

"The working party . . . is of the opinion that the subject is essentially a study of belief systems and that no such system can be arbitrarily excluded. It includes studying systems which have a super-natural referent (and which are usually called religious) as well as those which have not. Some change of name would seem to be indicated . . ." *REC p.10.*

"To help (the child) identify and answer for himself the fundamental questions on which a purposeful philosophy of life depends." *DES: p.1.*

"That in deciding what should be taught consideration should be given to the interests and aptitudes of children at various ages."

REC: p.3. Recommendation 3.

THE HUMANIST POSITION

None of the quotations above is drawn from Humanist publications. Those who believe that the consensus that is emerging can be achieved without changes in the law should consider events in Birmingham. A Conference to revise the Agreed Syllabus was duly set up, and it produced a document which was an expression of genuine consensus. However, as soon as it became public, legal appeals were made that it was not legitimate under the 1944 Act; and it was withdrawn for amendment. The resultant changes quite destroyed its character; the revised Syllabus is no longer fair or balanced.

If the wide consensus of educational opinion is to find expression in the schools, the religious clauses of the 1944 Act must be changed, and religious education must be set in a new context.

The BHA has presented a constructive way forward out of the present unsatisfactory and unhappy muddle. It is a draft Bill to revise the 1944 Act. The title of the booklet containing them encapsulates the principles that underlie all the quotations in this leaflet – "Objective, Fair and Balanced".

Notes:

*The Schools Council 'is an independent body with a majority of teacher members. Its purpose is to undertake in England and Wales research and development work into curricula, teaching methods and examinations in schools, and in other ways to help teachers decide what to teach and how to teach it. The Council is financed by equal contributions from local education authorities and the Department of Education and Science.'

(From its 1975/76 Report).

'The Social Morality Council includes Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Free Churchmen, Jews and Humanists.

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